

DAUGHTER OF CARTHAGE SON OF ROME

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of an ancient battle. In the foreground, a woman with long, dark, wavy hair is shown from the back, wearing a long, flowing white dress with a large bow at the waist. She is looking back over her right shoulder towards the viewer. Behind her, a chaotic battle scene unfolds. On the left, a large elephant is being used as a war machine, surrounded by soldiers. In the center and right, a dense group of soldiers in Roman-style armor, including helmets and shields, are engaged in combat. The scene is set in a rocky, hilly landscape under a hazy, golden-brown sky, suggesting a dramatic and historical setting.

KATE Q. JOHNSON

DAUGHTER OF CARTHAGE,
SON OF ROME

a novel

KATE Q. JOHNSON



Bellastoria Press

Acclaim for Kate Q. Johnson

Daughter of Carthage, Son of Rome

Kate Q. Johnson has woven a compelling tale that brings to life the high stakes of political rivalries, a daring heroine and an honorable but torn military leader. Daughter of Carthage, Son of Rome is a vivid recreation of the ancient world and a sensitive portrayal of the demands of the human heart.

—**Linda Cardillo**, award winning author of historical novels such as *Love That Moves the Sun*, *Dancing on Sunday Afternoons*, and the *First Light* trilogy.

Kate Q. Johnson's sure-handed debut novel tells the story of a wartime Romeo and Juliet, two star-crossed lovers whose lives collide at a moment when history might have swung off in a different direction

—**Sherry Christie**, author of the *Roma Amor* saga.

About the Book

Elissa Mago, a Carthaginian heiress, recklessly flees the prospect of a despised arranged marriage and arrives in Italy vulnerable yet defiant on the cusp of Hannibal's audacious crossing of the Alps and invasion of Roman territory.

Marcus Gracchus, a brilliant and celebrated Roman Centurion, questions his own loyalty to Rome after his brother is murdered and he is ordered to serve under the leadership of the vindictive man who orchestrated his brother's death.

A chance encounter thrusts the two together, first as captive and captor. But violence both on the battlefield and within the Roman legion eventually leads them into an alliance that is tested repeatedly by their ties to home. Ultimately, they must choose—their love for one another or their loyalty to their people.

Daughter of Carthage, Son of Rome

Copyright © 2021 by Kate Q. Johnson

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher—
Bellastoria Press, P.O. Box 60341, Longmeadow, MA 01116.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Wicked Smart Design.com

Bellastoria Press
P.O. Box 60341
Longmeadow, MA 01116
info@bellastoriapress.com
www.bellastoriapress.com

ISBN Ebook: 978-1-942209-86-7

Paperback: 978-1-942209-88-1

Table of Contents

[DAUGHTER OF CARTHAGE, SON OF ROME](#)

[Acclaim for Kate Q. Johnson](#)

[About the Book](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[About the Author](#)

*To Alex,
You're the reason I write love stories.*

Western Mediterranean Third Century BC



INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the third century BC, Rome and Carthage were the two greatest civilizations in the western Mediterranean region. The mere proximity of their massive empires might have made collision inevitable, but they were also cities founded on fundamentally opposing principles. Rome was a militant, aggressively expanding city whose citizens had recently subdued the entire Italian peninsula after centuries of war. Carthage was a prosperous city of merchants who had acquired large swaths of land in North Africa and Iberia (modern Spain) through trade and skillful negotiation with allies. Rome and Carthage first clashed from 264-241 BC in a war that involved the greatest naval battles of antiquity and left hundreds of thousands dead on both sides. After fighting to a bitter loss, the Carthaginians were desperate to retain their dominance over the seas and chafing under humiliating reparations to Rome. The rise of the Barca family, led by the brilliant young general, Hannibal, who had a blood debt from his father to pay against Rome, was the ember that set the fires of war raging once again.

Chapter 1

Carthage, 218 BC

When Elissa Mago had first reached her hiding spot, she'd feared her heart was beating so loudly someone would find her. A sentry on the watchtower could probably hear its thudding. But no one had appeared, and she had to go. She couldn't let all her hopes and dreams die today with her marriage to Merbal. It was too soon to give them all up.

Although it was still early, the night sky had brightened enough for Elissa to make out her surroundings. She'd been crouched behind this wooden crate for nearly an hour, and her knees were growing stiff. The straps of her leather sandals dug into her ankles and calves. Elissa picked nervously at a loose strand of wool on her dress. She had taken it from a slave girl; the only daughter of Hanno the Great shouldn't be seen in such unstylish garb. The dress suited her well enough, just an inch too short for her long frame. Her seamstress would have wanted to take it in around her chest.

Elissa noticed some straw sticking out from the corner of the crate. It most likely held something fragile, perhaps pottery that had arrived yesterday after the long voyage from Tyre.

Elissa hugged the cloth satchel in her arms tighter and the handful of coins she had stuffed inside pressed into her skin.

She would never see her people's ancestral homeland now.

Her father had said he might take her there one day, but now...well, now she was quite sure her father would never speak to her again, much less take her to Tyre. He'd probably never intended to take her in the first place. Men rarely took women on voyages merely for pleasure, especially men like her father. Her brother, Barro, might have taken her, but he was gone now, too.

Remembering her brother's absence was painful, and it brought Elissa back to the present. The water lapped gently against the dock in front of her. The air was hot and sticky; it filled her nostrils and throat as she breathed. A stench hung all around. Yesterday's catch soon to be mixed with today's; it was so unlike the fresh countryside where Elissa had grown up. The walls

of Carthage loomed over her back. They were originally built to be taller than any building in the city, but its citizenry had grown tenfold since then. Cramped, multifamily dwellings now reached above their rim and jutted into the sandstone. From her vantage at the merchant port outside the city, Carthage appeared to be bursting at its seams.

Just like Merbal. Elissa shuddered involuntarily at the thought of her husband-to-be.

Merbal's tunics often appeared to be at risk of splitting under the strain of his gut. As his wife, it would have been her responsibility to see to their mending. She would have been no more than a warm body to bear an old man's pleasure, a prize piece of jewelry to be paraded at society events. And for what? Some silver for her father and a few votes in the Council of Elders for Merbal? Surely she was worth more than that.

Her father's ship was moored ahead of her, gently bumping against the wooden dock. Its lower bay was open and ready to receive its cargo. There was no cover between her crate and the hull of the ship at the end of the dock, but she might be able to run fast enough. She'd only need a minute, and she'd be hard to spot in the dim light of dawn. Sweat beaded underneath her hair. *Was this her moment?*

Hoof beats could be heard in the distance along with a high-pitched neighing.

They're here!

She would stick to the original plan. A herd of her father's horses, some of the finest in Africa, would round the corner at any moment. The poor beasts would be driven onto the ship and sold across the Mediterranean to the highest bidder. Taanit, a Numidian, and Hanno's freed slave turned merchant, would do the selling. With war declared and the lucrative silver mines in Iberia shut down, her father needed the money. What her father didn't need was Taanit helping his daughter escape a carefully arranged marriage. What he didn't know was that Taanit had been as dear to her as a brother during her childhood exile outside the city. Elissa tightened her jaw. She regretted what her actions would cost her father; truly, she did. But there was no other choice.

Elissa couldn't see the horses from behind the city walls, though the planks of the dock were already shaking beneath her. She imagined their churning hooves throwing up dust as they trotted briskly down the road outside Carthage and toward the gate in the wall that opened to the docks.

Elissa peered around the crate and saw the gate was still closed. No sentry appeared to be manning it. That wasn't good. Any horseman knew better than to try and stop a herd of thundering horses; if they were forced into a closed wall they'd flow like water to the openings on both sides. It would be chaos, and her chance of escape would be gone.

Thud.

The gate swung open, hitting the sandstone wall behind it. Elissa exhaled shakily. A familiar figure came out from behind the gate.

Elissa moved lithely to the other side of her crate. It was Taanit. He was still far away, but Elissa couldn't risk letting him see her. Not yet anyway. He might be a dear friend, but there was no chance he'd help her onto the ship, and only a slim chance he wouldn't turn it around once he discovered her at sea.

One hundred glimmering warhorses trotted toward Elissa's dock. They were tied together in tightly packed rows of five, with no more than a few men from the neighboring territory of Numidia at the back and sides of the herd to guide them. The horses sped to a gallop as the Numidians tried to pre-empt their fear of the water around them by driving them harder. The first row of horses approached, a tangle of sinew and bones speeding toward her. They were packed so closely together, you could hardly see where one horse ended and the next one began.

Elissa sent up a prayer to Astarte—whose symbol was the horse, after all—and crouched low, the bag slung tightly over her shoulder. The horses were so close now she could touch the legs of the one nearest her. The air was thick with their panic. Their hooves whipped up a frenzied wind as they collided with the planks and darted back up again. Elissa's mind raced with fear; surely she'd be trampled in there! The center of the herd reached her. It was time to choose between probably being trampled and certainly being married.

She leaped.

The resolution in her legs surprised her, and she handily caught the mane of the small bay nearest to her. It skittered to the side, pressing hard against a larger gray next to it. Elissa hung tightly to the horse's mane, half-running, half being carried toward the ship. But this wasn't good enough! She was on the outside of the herd and clearly visible to the Numidians if they bothered to look. She had to move to the center.

Elissa gulped in a final breath of air and jumped. Still holding her bay's mane with one hand, she swung under the horse's neck, grinding against its chest as the rump of the horse in front shoved against her. Elissa couldn't see anything other than the sweat-darkened hair on her horse's neck. She blindly thrust out her hand, searching for the mane of the gray beside her. Got it! She swung free of the bay and onto the other horse, her satchel still bouncing on her shoulder.

A sudden jolt of pain shot through her left foot and up her leg.

"Shit!" she swore. The thundering horses easily drowned her out.

The horses were so close to each other, there was hardly any ground not covered by a hammering hoof. Elissa tried placing just the toe of her left foot on the ground and cried out in pain. She bit down on her lip. Hard. A broken foot was the least of her concerns at the moment. Not when a broken body could soon follow.

Fear coursing through her veins, Elissa swung her injured foot onto the back of the gray so its withers were under the crook of her knee. She flattened her torso against the horse's neck to keep from sliding down and let her other leg dangle helplessly. The gray dashed forward to escape the added weight on its neck but had nowhere to go. The pressure on her back from the horse beside her was increasing. She could taste the sweat on her horse's neck. Salt wet her tongue; grainy hair filled her mouth.

Panic rose from Elissa's stomach and into her throat. She couldn't see. She couldn't breathe. The air in her lungs was being squeezed out by the horse at her back. The strap of her bag fell to her elbow, then her wrist. She tightened her left leg, trying to bring her body higher, toward the light, but she was falling away instead. She was slipping down!

The churning hooves thundered in her ears. Her body reverberated with noise, motion, fear. She was squeezing the gray as hard as she could, but its hooves only got closer. She would be trampled, her escape for naught. Her desperate stab at freedom, crushed under their uncaring feet. Her sandal remained hooked over her horse's back; if it came free she would tumble to the ground headfirst. Taanit would find her body after it had been obliterated by a thousand hooves. Would he even recognize her? Her father would never know what had happened.

The sound grew to a deafening roar. A horse's knee clipped her chin, snapping her head against her back. This was it then, her story over before it had really begun.

Her foot slipped.

She managed to hold on to the gray's mane to keep her head above the hooves. But something was different. The horses' feet were on soft straw instead of wooden planks, and they were motionless. The roaring in her ears had receded to only the stomping and rubbing of restless horses. She'd made it onto the ship!

Elissa let go of her gray, slid down and blinked. The light was dim, but she could make out the curving black wood of the ship's hull. A horse neighed shrilly nearby and her gray stomped its feet in answer. Footsteps echoed on the gangway.

Elissa forced herself to take a deep breath and still her trembling body. She wasn't safe yet, and it was too soon to be seen. She had to hide. She pulled the satchel onto her shoulder and willed her legs back into motion. She weaved between rumps and under necks until she reached a corner of the hull. There was a pile of straw here, deep enough to cover a body. If the Numidians were coming to check on the horses, she'd be hidden from their view. Elissa looked toward the open door in the hull. Bright light was streaming in. The sun had risen over Carthage, and a tiny rectangle of blue sky was illuminating the darkness. All she'd ever known was through that door. Elissa turned away slowly. If only it was all she'd ever wanted.

She stepped into the piled hay, crouched down and rearranged the stalks until everything but her face was covered. She would wait until nightfall to find Taanit. Then she'd beg him to take her with him to wherever this ship was headed. Elissa didn't know what he'd do when he saw her. He might turn around immediately and return her to her father, or send her back to Merbal. Perhaps her oldest, and only, real friend might help her. He might choose to share the freedom he'd bought since his childhood as her father's slave. Either way, her fate was still in the hands of a man. She would have paid anything for a different life, but no one had told her the cost.

Chapter 2

Taanit leaned over the side of the ship, gazing at the inky water below. He gripped the rail with brown-skinned, work-hardened hands. Water wasn't natural to him. Numidians were horse people, bred in the plains and rolling hills of Northern Africa. The smell of salt, the thick moisture hanging in the air—it all felt foreign to him. He knew the dryness of a desert wind whipping across his face, the pounding of a horse between his legs, the ache in his back after a long day of harvest.

Unfortunately for him, none of those skills was useful to a merchant in the Mediterranean. He would have been better off with a knack for lying and a love of swimming. At the very least, he mused, if the horses could get used to the water, then so could he.

Taanit ran a hand through the short spirals in his hair. It was the same color as the water, and cropped too close to be fashionable. He didn't care; there was nothing fashionable about being a poor freedman. Still, he was proud of what he had accomplished in his twenty years. He'd been born a slave on the country estate of a wealthy Carthaginian man, and though he had always been treated well, he'd never been able to forget that his life was not his own. He carefully saved every coin he'd ever been given until he was able to buy his freedom from Hanno four years ago. He would have left immediately, but he had been waiting for the opportunity to buy his mother as well. Sadly she'd died and he was alone for the first time, but he had enough money to purchase a horse. It fetched a nice profit at the city market, and his career as a merchant had begun.

Taanit glanced up at the sky, lost in memories. It was brilliant black tonight, lit by the glow of a thousand tiny pinpricks and the sliver of a new moon. Not even a puff of wind to disturb the air.

An oar clattered to the deck behind him.

“Gods take it!” someone swore harshly. It sounded like a woman.

Taanit strode quickly to where the noise had come from. A figure was crouching behind the mast, trying to prevent a second oar from following the first. He reached out and grabbed a fistful of dark hair.

“Ow! For the love of Melqart, let me go, Taanit!”

He recoiled in shock at the familiar voice.

“E...Elissa?” he stuttered in disbelief.

“Yes, Taanit! Let me go!”

Taanit released his grip and stumbled backward. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear the apparition in front of his eyes. The woman’s dark hair hung in heavy waves around her pale face, interwoven with occasional stalks of straw. She had the same high cheekbones, arching delicately down to a pair of full lips that he remembered. Her nose was curved upward at the tip, and held high in typical stubbornness. Yes, it could only be Elissa. When he had last seen her, she’d been a tall and gangly fourteen-year-old, but now, four years later, she’d grown into a woman of remarkable beauty.

Taanit was incredulous. “What...what are you doing here, Elissa?”

Even in the dim light of the stars he could see her pale-green eyes flare with emotion. He knew from memory that they were flecked with amber, giving them an almost feline quality.

“Taanit, I’m sorry. I had to come,” she said quickly. There was a touch of desperation in her voice.

“What have you done, Elissa?” Taanit said, more loudly this time. His mind had almost caught up to the reality of the situation. “You *can’t* be here! Your father will be livid, and your brother, he might just kill me!”

Heat rose in Elissa’s cheeks. They looked vivid against the night sky.

“What have *I* done?” she protested. “Only taken what little freedom I have to escape a lifetime of misery shackled to an uncaring, greedy husband!”

Taanit took a step backward at that. She was right. When he’d met with Elissa’s father a few weeks before to discuss the Numidian horses he was going to sell, he had also endeavored to determine Elissa’s whereabouts. It had been nearly four years since her father had moved her from his property in Zama where they’d both grown up. Hanno had informed him that she was in Carthage and engaged to be married. “A very prosperous match,” he had explained smugly, looking uncharacteristically pleased with his daughter. Taanit had wanted to know more but didn’t push his luck, since his fledgling career as a merchant depended on Hanno being happy with him.

“Elissa.” He made his voice softer. “If you’ve run away from your husband...”

“Husband-to-be,” she corrected.

“Nevertheless, you can’t do this. Your father would never allow it. We’ll have to turn around.”

“Don’t you dare, Taanit,” Elissa said sharply. “I’m not going anywhere. I didn’t almost get run over by a hundred horses to turn around now.”

“Run over by *what?*” Taanit inhaled sharply as he understood her meaning. “That’s how you snuck on? With the horses?”

“Yes. I hid on the dock and jumped into the herd. They carried me onto the ship.”

She said it so matter-of-factly that Taanit nearly missed the audacity of what she’d done. They’d always tried to surpass each other with their exploits when they’d played together as children, but her daring today certainly exceeded anything they’d accomplished then.

Taanit didn’t congratulate her. He turned away instead.

“We have to go back,” he said, facing the water. “I’m turning the ship around and we’re going back. Where we’re headed is no place for a Carthaginian. No place for a woman.”

Elissa paused. “There’s no wind. Taanit We can’t go anywhere right now.”

“In the morning then. I’ll tell the crew to return to Carthage.”

“Please, Taanit. I have a plan. Just hear me out.”

Taanit shook his head but turned back to face her. Her shoulders had sagged but she still looked nowhere near giving up.

He sighed. “What’s this plan, Elissa? Although I’m sure whatever it is won’t end well for me.”

“It will. It won’t even affect your business with my father.”

Taanit scoffed. “Not likely.”

“Please, just listen,” Elissa pleaded. “I’ll stay hidden on the ship until we dock, wherever that is. When your men see me, they’ll be shocked, of course. They might even insist that we return to Carthage. But at that point, the quickest thing to do will be to sell the horses and then sail home. You can send word to my father that I’m with you and that you’ll escort me back to Carthage as soon as possible. Whatever he might think of me, my father wouldn’t want to risk having me sail back alone. In the meantime, I’ll help you or hide. I’ll do whatever you wish while you’re selling the horses. Then we’ll go home. I’ll return to my cage and you to your business. As simple as that.”

“As simple as that?” Taanit repeated wryly.

“Yes, Taanit! There will be no harm to my father’s opinion of you or his precious trade, and you’ll have helped me out of an awful situation. If you can try and remember, we used to be great friends.”

He softened. “Elissa, I want to help you, truly I do, and I have not forgotten what we were to each other. But what will this plan accomplish? You’ll be going home to the same situation, only with your father furious and a thousand times less likely to be sympathetic to you.”

“No,” Elissa said with utter conviction. “Everything will not be the same when I return. I didn’t just run away before getting married, I ran away on my *wedding* day. While I hid in the straw on my father’s ship, the elite of Carthage gathered to watch the daughter of Hanno the Great marry a man even older and richer than he. Silver for my father and a fledgling political career for my husband-to-be—it was the perfect arrangement. Except there was no bride to meet him there, and the nobility of Carthage is shaking tonight as a result, half of them with fury at my presumption, and half with excitement at scandal besetting the Magos yet again.” Elissa paused at this, her voice tight. “My reputation will be utterly ruined. Merbal will never want me after this humiliation. No man in Carthage will.”

“But what if he does still want you?” Taanit asked gently. “What if he convinces your father to increase your dowry exorbitantly to compensate him for the humiliation and then marries you anyway?”

Elissa looked past him at the dark water below. “I’ve thought of that, too,” she muttered.

“And?” Taanit prompted, trying to catch her eye.

She turned to look at him directly, and her face hardened with resolve.

“I’ll say I was raped on the journey. No amount my father can give will be enough to induce a man to take a ruined bride.”

Taanit stepped back, staring at her.

“And if you’re going to point out that my father will have a doctor verify my story, I already know that,” She bit out. “I know how to bleed myself like a man would,” she said more quietly, but her eyes danced with fury.

The moonlight cast Elissa in sharp relief; dark hair framed ghostly white skin, a sphere inset with glowing green eyes. She looked every bit the fallen goddess.

Taanit wanted to protest more, and he had the right to worry. If it came to the worst, Elissa couldn’t guarantee that her father wouldn’t have him

exiled or worse for allowing her to be raped in his care. And this plan of hers...well, she might avoid a marriage because of it, but most women would choose an unhappy marriage over the fate of a ruined woman. In this world, there was no real life for a woman without a man. She would be an outcast, forever dependent on the generosity of her father or brother for protection and care. But Taanit held his tongue. She knew the consequences, and besides, Elissa was not most women. He couldn't stop her, not really; she would always find another way. And she'd already come so far.

“All right,” Taanit said. “You can stay.”

Chapter 3

Moonlight streamed in through the open window; pale curtains danced on a gentle ocean breeze. An infant slept on a small couch raised above the cold floor, safely swaddled in silks and illuminated by a pale beam of light. The moonlight was mottled with dark spots, Luna's tears staining her celestial cloak. A shadow passed through the light, temporarily obscuring the infant, and a dark figure approached, drawing an aimless circle through the room. The figure cast the soft notes of a song around itself: a thin tether of chord clinging to the moving air. But the air cast off its binding and swirled about the figure with indifference. The song grew more melancholy, the notes stretched longer and longer, reaching into the space of another time. The figure leaned over the infant, and Elissa felt the soft brush of lips on her forehead. Then the figure was gone, the thin spectre cast out of the light. Only her song remained, and the faint imprint of warmth on Elissa's forehead.

Elissa involuntarily brought a hand to her forehead. She felt cool skin under her fingertips. A familiar surge of disappointment swelled in her chest.

What did you expect? She thought bitterly. She'd had this dream many times since she was a child. Elissa used to think it was her mother trying to bring her some message from the other side. But she was too old to believe that now. Her mother was dead and not coming back in any form. Besides, she'd taken herself to the other side, so what possible reason could she have for trying to get back?

Hazy memories flooded her mind—servants whispering in hushed tones behind doorways, her father white-faced and numb, refusing to even look at her. Elissa was far too young to understand at the time, of course, but later, Barro had gently explained it to her.

“Mother was very sad after you were born, Elissa. She grew quieter and quieter until eventually she refused to leave her room or speak to anyone. Father said he tried everything—presents, promises. I used to listen outside their door at night and hear him whispering to her like one of our nurses. But it was no use and finally she ended her sickness with a knife. It was very hard for Father. He didn't leave the house for weeks afterward.

And when he did, the shame of it nearly killed him. People are not kind to the family of a woman who kills herself after giving birth to a healthy baby girl.”

Elissa read between the lines on that one. He meant that people wondered what was so wrong with her that her mother had killed herself. Her father sent her out of the city, to Zama, shortly afterward. Barro said it was to protect her from the malicious whispers of society, but Elissa knew it was more than that. There was a reason she’d hardly seen her father twice a year until she was fourteen. He had only brought her back to Carthage because her absence from society at such a marriageable age had become more conspicuous than her presence. He blamed her for his beloved Jezebel’s death. And truth be told, she understood why.

Even now, nearly eighteen years after her mother had died, Elissa still felt the lingering stares of councillors’ wives—their eyes watching her, dissecting her, wondering what was wrong with her. They looked the other way when her father approached, of course; Hanno the Great had made it clear that any child of his was beyond reproach. Occasionally, Elissa would catch her father staring at her with pain in his eyes, and Elissa knew his true thoughts.

Elissa turned on the straw mattress and tried to shake that old feeling of guilt. Besides, there had been distinct advantages to growing up in the country, away from the watchful eyes of a father or mother. The best tutors in Latin, Greek and history had attended her, but after her morning lessons, she’d been left to roam the estate freely. She’d made the most of her liberty, running wild with Taanit and the other children in nothing but a dirty frock—climbing trees, stealing horses, forever on the hunt for the next adventure. Barro had continued to visit her several times a year even after he reached manhood, and had belatedly tried to enforce some discipline, but he left for the army before his rules could stick.

Elissa was half-awake now, and the pain from her bruised foot brought her back to the present. The dark wood of the ship’s walls seemed to close in around her narrow cot. Taanit had brought her to his cabin after he agreed to let her stay. She had objected to taking his bed, but his quarters were the only private ones on the ship, and there was no other way to hide from the rest of the crew. Dim light filtered into the room from the gap under the door. What time was it? The crack suddenly widened and the spartan cabin was cast in gray light. Taanit slipped inside.

Elissa propped herself against the back wall and rubbed the remaining sleep from her eyes. Taanit set a plate of dark bread and figs at the foot of her bed and turned to leave.

“Wait, Taanit.” Elissa swung her legs out from under the scratchy blanket and nearly upended the tray.

He put his finger to his lips and shook his head. Elissa paused, and then nodded. No talking. Taanit left the room quickly.

Elissa felt a bump and she lurched forward, absently pulling straw through the porous blanket on her mattress. She put out a leg to steady herself. Taanit had been very generous to offer her his cabin for the weeklong journey, but the small wooden box had quickly come to feel like a prison.

She sighed. Cell or cabin, she had to remember she was lucky to have it. She’d tried leaving the cabin one night after the ship’s crew was long asleep, and had nearly stumbled over Taanit’s sleeping body outside her door. Her protests had died in her throat with one look at his angry face. She’d retreated to her room with promises to remain there. One of Taanit’s conditions for letting her stay was that she not be seen by any of the crew until after they docked. It was simpler not to have to provide any explanations until it was too late to turn back, and besides, there were superstitions about women suddenly appearing at sea. Taanit did not want to risk a mutiny. After they docked, he was planning to tell the other Numidians that Elissa was a distant relative who’d unexpectedly become stranded in Italy and required his assistance in returning to Greece. The lie wasn’t outrageous; Elissa had inherited her pale skin from her Athenian mother. But beyond that, her Greek resemblance abruptly ended, and her dark hair and angular features were distinctly Carthaginian. Elissa could only pray that the Numidians hadn’t seen too many Greeks.

A week had passed in the dim silence of the cabin. Elissa tried to stay occupied by playing dice with herself, and recalling distant facts her tutors had told her about Greece, but the passage of days was painfully slow. It had given her trampled foot a chance to heal, though. The bruises above her toes had faded to dull splotches of yellow and green, and she could walk normally now. Taanit came twice a day to check on her and deliver her meals, but he never stayed long. He claimed to be too busy caring for the

horses and making sure the men were working. Elissa knew she'd put him in a difficult position, and she regretted it, but she didn't understand his aloofness. Growing up, he'd been as close to her as a brother; she wondered what had been lost between them.

A second bump brought the ship to a sudden stop. A horse whinnied below deck. Apparently the horses were as anxious to get off the ship as she was. The door to the cabin opened and Taanit briskly walked in. He shut the door quickly behind him.

"We've docked," he said, turning to face Elissa.

He must have seen the excitement rising in her face because he quelled it immediately.

"Elissa," he continued gruffly, "no one can see you yet. I'll escort you from the cabin once we have the horses unloaded and on their way to Vetulonium. We'll ride together after them. If we're fast, we should be there by nightfall."

She bobbed her head in understanding.

"Thank you, Taanit!" she said eagerly.

Taanit sighed and gave her a slight smile. "I'm sorry to have kept you here this past week."

He turned to leave but took a step toward Elissa instead, watching her intently. "Elissa, I need you to understand the seriousness of the situation. We're in Etruria now—an ally of Rome who's at war with your city. I know the fighting will happen far away in Iberia, but it's imperative no one find out where you're from," Taanit finished uneasily. He seemed hesitant to even say "Carthage" out loud.

Elissa's temper flared. Did he think she was still a child, incapable of taking the world seriously? At eighteen years she might be young, but she'd never been a child. Her mother's actions after her birth, and her father's reactions, had ensured that.

"I understand perfectly, Taanit."

Taanit dropped his eyes and nodded curtly. The door closed behind him.

"We're ready for you now." Taanit ducked his head into the cabin several hours later, looking a little less grave.

Elissa grabbed her bag from the chair and followed him out of the cabin. After a week spent in the dim light of the ship, the bright light on deck was blinding. She squinted as she climbed out of the hull, and craned her neck to get her bearings. The deck seemed deserted, and the horses no longer stomped down below. Perhaps they'd already left for the village Taanit had mentioned.

Her eyes widened as she looked past the deck to the surrounding vista. Turquoise water met jagged gray cliffs at the shoreline, which faded into rounded green hills stretching far into the distance. The slopes of the hills were verdant with leafy trees and grass that was still thick from summer. Carthage was a place of brown and blue, sand and sea, with the occasional oasis of color. But this land was vibrant green; lushness and fertility seeped from the very ground. Even the sky appeared bluer, as if the sun knew that such a land would need special attention.

"It's magnificent," Elissa whispered.

"I thought you'd like it." Taanit placed a hand on her shoulder. "Come. We should be on our way."

Elissa noticed the cautious warmth in his eyes and smiled up at him gratefully. She followed him down the gangway and along the dock toward a narrow strip of brown sand that comprised the beach. There were two horses waiting there. They'd been tied to a stake in the ground and tacked in the Numidian fashion—that is, with no tack at all. Riders had a loop of rope around the horses' necks to give them direction; their backs were otherwise bare. One of the horses, a large roan, pawed the ground eagerly. The smaller black mare beside him dipped her head in response. Taanit walked up to the roan and twined a hand in his mane. He swung himself up on the horse's back before Elissa had even reached her steed.

Elissa ignored his impatience and ran her hand across the mare's forehead. A triangular white star peeked out from between her fingers. Her hand shook slightly as she moved it to the mare's mane and wound her fingers through the coarse hair. She had abandoned her father and fled to a foreign country full of enemies and only one friend—a reluctant friend at that. She had come so far already; where would this horse take her now? Elissa pulled down on the mare's mane and swung onto her back almost as smoothly as Taanit. She squeezed her legs and quickly pushed the mare into a trot to hide the nervousness on her face. It was too late for second thoughts.

They rode away from the sea on a worn dirt road. The land quickly grew hilly, and they wound along the bottoms of the slopes in silence. The rhythm of the mare's gently moving withers gradually soothed Elissa's worries. As they rounded a bend in the road, she even started to feel some excitement about seeing what was next. Elissa had always felt confined within the sand walls of Carthage, and she longed to see more of the world. Barro said their mother named her Elissa after the great queen and founder of Carthage. Queen Elissa had run away from the ancient city of Tyre to escape her brother's cruelty. With a small band of loyal followers, she had sailed to Africa and negotiated to rent a narrow finger of land from the local Libyan king. Her city had prospered on the lucrative Mediterranean trade routes and the Libyan king had grown jealous. He demanded Elissa's hand in marriage as compensation for his loss. But Elissa was in love with another—Aeneas, the great hero of the Trojan War. She couldn't follow her love and still protect her city from war, so she built a great pyre and flung herself into the flames. The Libyans called her Dido, the wanderer, the woman who could never find peace.

Elissa glanced at Taanit absently. Would her story end as tragically as Queen Elissa's? Was it possible to have both peace and love?

Taanit looked back at Elissa. His eyes were bright, and his shoulders were no longer drawn up near his ears. He was clearly enjoying the ride.

"I think we should catch up to the rest of the horses in case the men are having trouble."

Elissa felt a familiar surge of guilt at his anxiety, but stopped herself. Perhaps there was a better way to make him forget his concerns.

"Shall we see who can get there first?"

"Elissa..." Taanit's voice was low in warning, but without the hard edge that would make her change her mind.

Elissa laughed lightly and gave her horse a mighty squeeze. The mare launched into a gallop that sent them flying down the road. The wind tore across her face and whipped her hair from its plait. It streamed behind her over the mare's back.

"Elissa!" she heard Taanit shout from behind.

Elissa looked over her shoulder, but Taanit had already kicked his horse into a gallop and was following her down the road.

Taanit closed in quickly, and soon Elissa's horse was only a neck ahead of Taanit's. A wide smile had cracked through Taanit's dour expression.

Elissa grinned and bent lower over the mare's neck. The mare strained forward and lowered her back, allowing her legs to extend farther over the ground. Her breath came in even puffs that matched her pounding hooves. She was relishing the freedom as much as Elissa.

All too soon, they rounded a corner and the Numidians and their horses came into view. There was still a large meadow between them and the Numidians, but Taanit would want to stop before they got too close and scared the horses. Elissa sighed and eased her weight back to tell the mare to slow.

But Taanit didn't slow. He was directly across from her now, and their legs jostled together as they ran. Taanit curled his legs up his horse's sides and pulled his feet underneath him until he was half-crouching on its back.

His grin turned fiendish as Elissa protested. "Oh, no, Taanit! Don't you dare!"

It was too late. Taanit sprang from his horse and let out a ferocious shriek as he jumped—a cry that would be instantly recognizable to any Numidian.

Elissa ducked low on the mare's neck to avoid his hurtling body. But there was no need. Taanit landed behind her with practiced precision. His legs straddled the mare tightly, and he moved his hands to the loop of rope around her neck. Elissa grimaced and shifted forward to add some space between them. Taanit pulled on the mare's lead and they began to slow. His roan trailed closely behind despite now being riderless. It was for good reason that people halfway across the world wanted Numidian horses.

Taanit grinned. "I couldn't be outdone by your clever escape, now could I?"

"That was not necessary!" Elissa said severely. But soon she was laughing. It was just as it had been when they were children.

They continued at an easy canter astride her willing mare until they reached the Numidians. The horses were tied together in the same rows of five as when they'd boarded the ship. The Numidians were directing them down the road from the back and sides at a brisk trot.

The man at the rear of the herd looked at Elissa with mild surprise as they approached. Elissa felt her cheeks color when she remembered Taanit's nearness, his arm wrapped tightly around her to hold the horse's lead. Elissa squirmed uncomfortably; she didn't want these men to get the wrong

impression. Taanit took certain liberties only because they were accustomed to a time when there was little distinction between girl and boy.

“Ababaal,” Taanit nodded briskly at the nearest Numidian.

The man returned his nod, staring straight ahead.

Elissa frowned. Acceptance wouldn't come easily with these Numidians.

Taanit chuckled, reading her mind. “Don't worry; you won't see much of them.”

He might have meant to sound reassuring, but his words had the opposite effect. Elissa wondered where he planned to stow her away this time.

* * *

They reached Vetulonium at dusk. Elissa stayed well back as Taanit and the Numidians drove the horses toward the city gates. She didn't want to be a burden to them, and she didn't mind the solitude. Elissa had never been to another city apart from Carthage, and even that city, her birthplace, made her uncomfortable. She felt uneasy within its high walls and its labyrinth of narrow streets. Carthage was a city teeming with bodies, faceless people going about similar lives. They rushed to the market to sell their wares, then to the temple to pray for good fortune, then home, to children they hoped would have better lives than theirs. Elissa would spend hours watching them from her father's home, and wonder if you needed a master to be a slave.

As the dark stone walls of Vetulonium drew nearer, she considered whether it would be the same in this city. It had once been one of the great Etruscan cities that had ruled western Italy. But the ancient civilization of Etruria had been brought to its knees by Rome nearly a century ago. The Etruscans were probably Roman in all but name now, another formidable people lost to the tide of Roman civilization.

The gate into the city was still open when they reached it, and the horses passed into Vetulonium without incident. The men drove them hard along a narrow road beside the wall. It was just wide enough for five horses abreast. Red thatched roofs circled upwards from the wall, and the tip of a white temple peeked over the summit of the city. The tidy rows of stone houses were so different from the tangled yellow bricks of Carthage.

They turned a corner in the road and the familiar shape of a stable appeared ahead. A corral had been left open in front of the stables. The Numidians directed the horses toward the entrance, and the sound of cracking whips cut through the still night air. Once they'd driven all the horses inside, the men convened outside the closed gate of the corral. They spoke quickly in Numidian, but from what Elissa could gather based on the few words she'd learned from Taanit, they intended to move the stallions to the stables to prevent fights from breaking out.

Elissa nudged her horse closer to get Taanit's attention.

"Wait there, Elissa," Taanit called without looking back.

She sighed. She could have helped.

Dusk had darkened to night by the time they were finished with the horses. Elissa had grown cold waiting. She shivered without a cloak. Her trepidation had returned with the darkness, and her body felt heavy as she stared up at the blank sky. She truly was far from home.

Finally Taanit approached. He nodded at her in silent acknowledgement and took off at a fast walk in the direction of the city. Elissa lowered her head and followed behind. They walked up the narrow streets of Vetulonium, Elissa taking two steps for every one of Taanit's. The dirt road had become stone, and the houses were clumped less closely together. The temple loomed large at the top of the hill when Taanit stopped.

"I sent one of the ship's crew ahead to secure us lodging. He mentioned an elderly couple who live alone in a comfortable house and occasionally accept boarders."

"So you'll be staying with me then?" Elissa asked hopefully. She did not relish the thought of being left alone in a room for another week.

Taanit led her down a smaller street on their right.

"No. I'll be staying with the men outside the stables. We need to keep an eye on the horses."

Elissa stared at her feet through the darkness. "But you'll come get me when you're showing the horses." She tried to make her voice sound firm.

They stopped in front of a doorway and Taanit put his hand on Elissa's shoulders. She shifted to face him.

"Elissa, I would love for you to come. I know you'd be helpful, and I... I know you'd be helpful," he finished lamely.

"It's settled then," Elissa said quickly.

“But I can’t. My duty is to keep you safe, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

Elissa sighed and gave him a weak smile. She shouldn’t ask more of him. Taanit had helped her so much; she couldn’t make his task any harder than she already had. Elissa took a deep breath and tried to let the cool air rinse away her nagging loneliness. She squared her shoulders and knocked solidly on the door.